COMMUNITY LIAISON UNIT

COLUMBUS DIVISION OF POLICE • STRATEGIC RESPONSE BUREAU

STREET GANGS AND FAMILY LIFE

Day to day family living has become more tedious throughout the years. We as parents, educators, criminal justice professionals, and members of our community, must take an interactive approach in the development for our children. We must open the lines of communication so that all of us, adults and children alike, have the opportunity to hear each other. Many of us, now as adults, probably hear our parents words come out of our own mouths. As we teach our own experience to our children, we must give our children a chance to teach their experience to us. Somewhere in between, we'll learn to understand both.

Defining a "GANG":

One commonly accepted definition of" gang" in the law enforcement community's: "a group of three or more individuals, which possesses leadership, structure, an identification system, and is involved in anti-social or criminal behavior." Gang membership has no age requirements, however it is estimated that most gang members are between the ages of 9 and 25. No single socio-economic group holds a monopoly on street gangs either. Membership in gangs crosses all racial, economic, and familial status boundaries.

The trickiest part of this definition is" **identification system**." Identifiers come in many forms. Some common types of identifiers include:

GRAFFITI – literally, the writing on the wall. Graffiti may also be found in school books, on personal items like book bags and clothes. Look for symbols that show up repeatedly.
BODY MARKING - graffiti on the person. Tattoos, scars, burns or other markings may match symbols found on personal items and other property. Gang members are tattooed to show allegiance to their gang.
CLOTHING – all for one. Many gangs require members to dress alike – the same colors, jackets, hats, shoes – the list goes on. Check for bandanas (rags) in a pocket or worn as an accessory. Look for other identifiers that may come up.

Do not forget that anti-social or criminal activity is a distinguishing feature of a gang. If a sudden negative change in behavior accompanies the appearance of identifiers, contact a local resource for guidance.

The constant education of the adult community is perhaps the greatest tool to combat the problems growing in younger society. We, as adults, must lead young people by our own example. We must be worthy role models for young people to follow. Your commitment and interest in our children now promotes a better future for all of us.

KEY TO SUCCESS: The Child Checklist:

How many of the following apply to a child that you know

- ☑ New nickname/new friends.
- ☑ Unusual "doodling" on school work.
- ☑ Possession of weapon.
- ☑ Possession of drugs/alcohol.
- ☑ Tattoos, scars or increased bruising.
- ☑ Different dress – color, style, etc.

A "**YES"** on one or more of these items does not necessarily mean a child is in a gang. It should prompt you to look at other behavioral changes and keep a close eye on changes in relationships held at school, at home, in the neighborhood and with the law. If you suspect a problem, call a local resource for assistance.

Finding Answers:

Finding the right approach to the gang problem is not necessarily an easy task. No single approach works for all people, or communities. As an individual involved in the life of a child, a number of personal efforts may bring some success in prevention and reduction of the gang problem. These may include:

COMMUNITY SUPPORT TEAMS –sometimes the best approach is a team approach. Work with law enforcement, educators and other community members to support anti-gang education programs. Bring issues up in a round-table forum so that all sides may be adequately examined.

GANG DIVERSION ACTIVITES - Bringing kids and adults together to work toward a common goal builds esteem, pride and a sense of togetherness for everyone. Children respond well when adults work with them, not for them.

POSITIVE PEER LEADERSHIP - Recognizing the development of young people in the community is an important part of giving kids a sense of accomplishment. It provides other children with a role model of their own. It also reinforces a young person's commitment to continued positive behavior and community contribution.

Street gangs bring chaos and lawlessness to our communities; but we can stop the destruction. As adults, we must take a fair, firm and consistent approach when working with young people. We must demand of ourselves what we demand of our children, namely a total commitment to the improvement of our own part of the world, and it must start with us.